



Open Road Magazine April 3, 2000 Article: Line It

“Because it’s a messy, clumsy, sharp-edged world out there, your pickup deserves some protection”

BY JOHN PEARLEY HUFFMAN

The idea behind bedliners couldn't be more simple. Pickup truck beds come from the factory as painted metal containers that are virtually guaranteed to scuff, scratch, dent and bend the moment actual cargo is planted into them. A bedliner overlays that metal and paint with a rugged surface that can withstand the abuse of work and play so the bed doesn't have to. It's sort of like plastic covers for the living room furniture, but without the thigh-sticking stigma.

When buying a new pickup, the easiest path is just to ask the dealer to throw a liner in with the purchase. Every truck maker offers a dealer-installed liner of some sort and they're usually perfectly fine products. Except that often, compared with equally good liners from independent sources, dealer-installed liners can be expensive. That extra eight bucks a month for sixty months may not seem like a lot when you discuss it in the dealership finance manager's office. But do the math and that means you're paying \$480 in principal alone for a liner that can be as little as \$200 if you buy it outright and install it yourself.

For older trucks, the ugly truth is that most drop-in plastic liners take serious abuse and get used up over time. A brittle, sun-damaged or cracked liner can be worse than no liner at all if all it's doing is trapping moisture between itself and some bare metal surface. And what good is a liner that gives way the moment a wheelbarrow is run over it? No, liners aren't forever and they'll likely have to be replaced long before the truck itself wears out. And you may not even want to replace a used-up liner with another drop-in when there are bed-coating materials options out there to consider.

America is the world's bedliner technology leader, and the biggest bedliner market. That means innovations abound, with lots of manufacturers to consider, on this seemingly simple item. There are liners in various colors, liners made of plastic, liners that incorporate storage compartments, metal liners that can withstand dropping an engine block from a height of 15 ft., and even carpet liners so soft they make a truck bed a true alternative to a Serta Perfect Sleeper. The trick is making sure of your own needs and expectations before you buy, and then knowing what products are out there. Because once you make that bed, you'll have to lie in it.



DROP-IN LINERS

Drop-in liners are, by far, the most common on the market and usually what one buys as original equipment at a dealer. Formed of tough plastic, drop-in liners are generally available as either “under rail” or “over rail” models.

Under-rail models extend their protection up to the bed rails and no farther. If, for instance, the bed is equipped with supplementary bed rails or a shell that must rest upon the rails, then an under-rail model is what you want. Over-rail liners extend up over the top of the bed edges so that their protection includes the side-panel tops. If the truck bed is going to be left open, and the bed is often (or even just sometimes) loaded from the side, then an over-rail liner is the best way to ensure protection.

Care must be taken when installing a drop-in liner to make sure that no water is trapped between the liner and bed where rust can form. Also, if a drop-in liner isn't properly secured, it can lift when the truck is at speed and that can mean irritating noise or warping. While it's tough to damage a drop-in liner, it isn't impossible, and once the liner is damaged it ought to be replaced. Otherwise moisture can intrude or, even worse, pieces of the liner itself can do damage to the bed.

Drop-in liners are affordable, install without bed modifications, provide excellent protection and, given proper care, should last for years.

SPRAY-IN LINERS

Spray-in liners are just that; chemical substances (a form of polyurethane) which are sprayed into a bed. They then harden into a non-skid, rugged, protective lining about $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch thick.

For trucks with modified beds or fitted with non-standard equipment (such as winches, toolboxes or equipment racks) the best thing about spray-in materials is that they contour them-selves to any shape. Since the liner adheres to the bed, there's no chance it will work loose and make additional wind noise.

The spray-in coatings are also available in different custom colors to match a truck's paint job or to contrast with it in some entertaining manner. A talented installer can even produce designs using the material in the form of, for example, a company logo. Beyond that, spray-on makers also claim excellent rust-prevention attributes for their products and, since the liner conforms to the contours of whatever it's sprayed upon, a minimal effect on cargo space.

The biggest disadvantage of the coating is that once it's in., the process is basically irreversible. Unlike a drop-in liner, once a spray-in is installed it literally becomes part of the bed. So if you have a giant Chicago Bears logo sprayed into your truck bed, you may not want to take the truck with you if you're transferred to Green Bay. Also, ask the drop-in liner people, and they'll tell you that spray-in liners don't offer the dent protection of their products.

Spray-in liners aren't usually something you buy at Pep Boys and apply yourself; installation is often done at centers set up for the process. Before spraying, the surrounding sheet metal is masked off and the bed, tailgate and cargo sidewalls are power sanded to insure lasting adhesion. If you do the job yourself, remember the chemicals can be messy and smelly; it's best to wear a respirator during application.



SWD URETHANE

SWD's 951 Quik-Shield aromatic polyurethane elastomer coating, the maker says, can be mixed into almost any color, cures quickly, is built of 100 percent solids, applies simply with commercial spraying equipment and can be reinforced with chopped fiberglass. The stuff is flexible, but remains stable from -15 F to 350 F. Thirty seconds after it's sprayed on, it can be walked on. SWD Urethane Company, P.O. Box 1422, Mesa, Arizona 85211-1422 800/828-1394 www.swdurethane.com